

WOODEN SPOIL

(Copyright, 1919, by George H. Doran Co.)

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

CHAPTER XIV—Continued.

"I'll do it," said Brousseau. "I meant to, and now—"

He rose to embrace her, but she stepped away from him. "Not until we are married, Edouard," she said.

Brousseau winced now. "It almost looks as if you didn't love me," he muttered in disgust. And in that sentence the major part of his character might have been epitomized.

Two days after the news reached Hilary he went into the village for his mail. Taking it to his office to read, he found among it a bulky envelope addressed to him from Ontario in an unknown writing. He opened it and found a letter from Morris.

However evasive the ex-manager had been in conversation, he was direct enough in writing. "You didn't treat me well, and I guess you had reason to act as you did," he wrote. "That hound Brousseau swindled me as he was swindling you, and I'm going to put you in possession of the facts and documents, which I took from his desk before leaving. You needn't have any scruples about using them, because they refer principally to you."

Hilary thought enough of the matter to send a man to Lafa, asking him to come in immediately; and that afternoon the two men went over the situation together.

"It's a clear case," said Hilary. "He's been swindling the property right and left, it seems. I allowed for a few thousands, but as I make it out it amounts to nearly eighty thousand."

Lafa whistled and took up the paper that Hilary handed him.

"This is the contract with Leblanc to cut on the St. Boniface limits," he said. "So there's no mistaking who owned that lumber in the river."

He took up another document. "A contract with the Cornwall Paper company to supply twenty thousand cords of spruce wood from the St. Boniface limits," he said. "And here's Morris' receipt for seven thousand dollars' commission on 'gummy fir' as he would call it—in other words, pulpwood sold off the seigniory during 1914, at 10 per cent. What do you make of it, Lafa?"

"Water-tight," answered Lafa. "Here's another document that makes interesting reading," continued Hilary, handing it to him.

Lafa studied it. "I don't get it," he said.

"It's Lamartine's acknowledgment of fifty thousand dollars received from Rosny for fifty shares in the North Empire Development company—one of Brousseau's interests. Now look at this one. Lamartine is remitting five thousand dollars less the broker's charges for the sale of North Empire Development stock, as per order. He doesn't say how much stock. Lamartine isn't a fool. But here's Rosny's acknowledgment of the five thousand dollars less broker's charges for the sale of fifty shares, dated March 9, 1913. Now here's a stock market clipping from a newspaper of March 4, showing the stock at \$875."

"That's where we've got him, Lafa. Lamartine's letter proves nothing, but Morris got hold of Rosny's acknowledgment, probably for blackmailing purposes, and it shows Brousseau has swindled Rosny out of \$37,000 on that deal. Probably there were others. That's where his money went."

"It's a pity Morris couldn't run straight, being as thorough as he is," said Lafa.

Hilary looked at him searchingly until he compelled him to return his gaze.

"You have been very reticent of late, Lafa. What's the trouble?"

"I guess it ain't much," said Connell. "Well, you see, it's this way," he went on reluctantly. "I knew what lies that blackguard was spreading about you. And I didn't know whether to tell you or not, Mr. Askew. I knew Baptiste saw us with that girl in Ste. Marie, and I knew from his face that he wasn't pleased. And again I didn't know what to do. And I decided to lie low. It's my way; maybe I was wrong, but I'm against butting in, by nature."

"Never mind, Lafa," said Hilary. "It's too late to make any difference now."

"No, it ain't too late!" shouted Lafa, leaping to his feet. "Mr. Askew, you haven't told him—Mr. Rosny—about that asbestos mine, have you? You ought to have gone to him and let him know. You could have saved Mamzelle Rosny from sacrificing herself this way. You can save her, and you're going to."

"I suppose I have let things drift," said Hilary somberly. "I lived in a sort of hope that the mess would clear up. And I hadn't the heart to do anything at all."

"There's the girl Marie—won't she say anything?"

"She's afraid of her father. There's no telling how he would take it. At present I don't think he knows anything."

"I wouldn't let that stand in my way," said Lafa emphatically.

"I don't think you'd really use that means of clearing yourself, if you were I, Lafa. And, besides that, she has my promise to say nothing, and that

settles the matter. No, Lafa, you're talking nonsense."

"Maybe I am," said Lafa stubbornly. "But I ain't going to see your happiness wrecked because two women haven't the sense and the heart to clear you. And I'm going to do it."

"No, you're not, Lafa," said Hilary bluntly.

"Why not? Good Lord, why not?"

"Because I'm leaving St. Boniface," answered Hilary.

"Mr. Askew!"

"I'm going," repeated Hilary, with a swift gesture of hopelessness. "You'll call me a quitter, I suppose."

"I certainly should," answered Lafa coolly. "The same as you did me."

"Maybe. But I came up here to play a certain game. I came to put the seigniory lumber business on its legs. And I've done it. I stayed to fight Brousseau after he nearly got me down, and I've beaten him. I've won that game on every point. I'm going to make Brousseau refund his stealings, and I'm going to leave you here in charge for the present, to wind up. I shall go to Quebec to start proceedings and try to find a purchaser. Your contract will hold as long as you want it to. And I'm not coming back. I've done what I came for, haven't I?" he ended defiantly.

"That's the way all quitters talk," said Lafa.

Hilary's nerves were gone, of course. Lafa knew that the last lap of the race was the grueling one. Hilary needed help, that was all. Hilary grew crafty with his idea.

"Well, you're boss, of course," he said reluctantly. "If you've made up your mind, it ain't for me to interfere. When are you leaving, sir?"

"I shall go out with Dupont when he takes his last load," answered Hilary. "That'll be Friday. We can't have the logs through the mill before then. Dupont doesn't know yet?"

"No."

Lafa reflected. The weather had changed suddenly during the preceding night. Already the shores of the St. Lawrence were thick with grinding floes. The middle passage was clear, but in a few days navigation would be impossible; a dog team would have to be procured and trained to run together. Already it was a difficult journey with a horse-sleigh between the camp and the mill. If the weather held, Hilary could be held until he, Lafa, had accomplished his purpose.

Hilary put on his hat and overcoat, picked up his snowshoes and went toward the stables. In a few minutes the horse had been harnessed to the sleigh and stood breathing great clouds of smoke into the frosty air. It started, and from the office doorway Lafa watched the man whom he loved best in the world of men driving away.

He waited till the sleigh had disappeared among the trees behind the bridge. He allowed ten minutes more, to make sure that Hilary would not change his intentions and return. Then he coolly opened Hilary's desk with a duplicate key that had been made after the burglary and took out the envelope that contained the papers from Morris. He removed these and thrust them into his pocket. In the empty envelope he placed some discarded letters from the waste-basket. Then he put back the envelope, closed the desk, strapped on his snowshoes and left the office.

Five minutes after he left Hilary was back. His decision had suddenly come to him. He had resolved to leave St. Boniface, and there was nothing to be gained by procrastination.

He wanted to leave St. Boniface forever, and to put the memory of the past months out of his mind, so far as it could be possible. He hated the little village; even Lafa's presence had become intolerable to him.

He went to Dupont on board his schooner and arranged for him to sail for Quebec the following evening with the little load—one schooner full—which he had. He instructed him to say nothing to anybody about the arrangement. He saw nothing strange in Dupont's manner or aspect and, had he done so, he would not have thought anything about it.

Having issued his instructions, he drove back toward the camp.

But, seeing that the office was dark and unoccupied, he stopped there on his way, opened his desk and took out the envelope which he supposed to contain the letter and paper from Morris. In Quebec he meant to go through them again, mailing to Rosny those papers that had reference to his affairs and placing the others in a lawyer's hands for a civil suit.

He packed a few of his personal effects in a bag and left the office, as he supposed for the last time.

CHAPTER XV.

Lafa Takes a Hand.

Lafa was surprised to feel the bitter tang of the air when he left the mill office. It was going to be winter now, he reflected, and if Hilary could be held only three days, there could be no question of an immediate journey to Quebec.

Reaching the waste of open ground before the Chateau, he saw that a

sleigh had been there that day; possibly it was in the stables now. He rang the bell, nodded to Robitaille, who opened the door, disregarding his incomprehensible address, which seemed to negative Lafa's wish to enter, and went by instinct into the living room at the end of the hall for the first time in his life.

He tapped at the door, but there came no answer. He knocked more loudly, and went in without waiting for any. He discovered the Seigneur in a big leather chair before the huge, glowing fire, Madeleine standing beside him and Edouard Brousseau a short distance away. There was an atmosphere of immediate constraint, as if Lafa's appearance had interrupted a tense interview. Lafa sensed it, but he did not care. He could hardly believe his luck. He had wanted Brousseau there badly, but he had not hoped to meet him.

Brousseau was the first to speak. He may have guessed the nature of Lafa's errand from Lafa's attitude, though not its fullness. He scowled.

"It's the man from the mill," he said in a sneering tone to Monsieur Rosny. Madeleine raised her eyes and Lafa read in them the same intuition that was in Brousseau's, and also her challenge. She was arming to oppose him in his fight for Hilary, she was preparing to fight against all that she held dearest, for the sake of the swindler across the room. Lafa, admired her courage, but this he had expected.

"My business is with Mr. Rosny," he said.

"Don't let that trouble you. I speak for Monsieur Rosny," answered Brousseau.

"You'll hear for him, too, then," retorted Lafa. "Mr. Rosny, that man is a liar, a thief and a swindling rogue. That's what I've come to prove."

Brousseau started forward, his face pale with rage. As he placed himself in a fighting attitude Lafa calmly assumed that of defense, the left fist ready, the right arm across his chest, turned outward and slightly upward. Brousseau was no coward, but he hesitated, and his moment passed.

The Seigneur's face grew dark with anger. "No man can say such things of a guest of mine," he cried, and gripped the arms of his chair as if trying to rise. Madeleine bent over him and restrained him. Her face was flushed with resentment.

"I told you my business was with you, Mr. Rosny," said Lafa, unperturbed. "I ain't speaking to him. God knows I don't want to speak to him. He says he's speaking for you, so let him speak to this. He's swindled the St. Boniface lumber company out of eighty thousand dollars, so far as we've learned yet, and maybe more. But I guess he's heard enough. I got the proofs, but maybe it's painful listening."

"Leave the Chateau immediately, Monsieur!" thundered the Seigneur.

"Not till I've finished speaking," answered Lafa. "Unless he asks me to

go, and then I'll think about it. He's speaking for you. You ain't in on this deal, Mr. Rosny. And now I've ante'd," he ended defiantly.

Madeleine came forward quietly. "You can go, Mr. Connell," she said in a voice vibrant with restrained anger. "We do not permit Monsieur Brousseau to be insulted, here or anywhere. Your conduct is intolerable. Leave instantly, and if you have anything to say to him in accusation say it when he has not a woman and a sick man present to restrain his resentment."

Lafa flushed. "And you ain't in it neither, Mamzelle," he answered. "What I got to say I say to Mr. Rosny. I come here to say it and I'll go when I said it."

"Oh, let him speak," snarled Brousseau. "Monsieur Askew is afraid to come here with his lies, so he has sent his man."

Madeleine's eyes flashed. "This is no place for personalities, Edouard," cried the girl. "Perhaps you will accompany Mr. Connell to the door and let him say what he wishes to say outside."

"Leave the Chateau immediately, Monsieur!"

go, and then I'll think about it. He's speaking for you. You ain't in on this deal, Mr. Rosny. And now I've ante'd," he ended defiantly.

Madeleine came forward quietly.

"You can go, Mr. Connell," she said in a voice vibrant with restrained anger. "We do not permit Monsieur Brousseau to be insulted, here or anywhere. Your conduct is intolerable. Leave instantly, and if you have anything to say to him in accusation say it when he has not a woman and a sick man present to restrain his resentment."

Lafa flushed. "And you ain't in it neither, Mamzelle," he answered. "What I got to say I say to Mr. Rosny. I come here to say it and I'll go when I said it."

"Oh, let him speak," snarled Brousseau. "Monsieur Askew is afraid to come here with his lies, so he has sent his man."

Madeleine's eyes flashed. "This is no place for personalities, Edouard," cried the girl. "Perhaps you will accompany Mr. Connell to the door and let him say what he wishes to say outside."

"I say it here!" cried Lafa in a furious voice that surprised himself. "He's cheated us out of eighty thousand dollars, and he's cheated you, Mr. Rosny, out of about as much, and probably more, and you can put it in any words you like. And I've got the papers to prove it—all of 'em."

Brousseau winced and staggered back dumfounded; there was no mistaking now that the man was afraid. Though Madeleine would not deign to acknowledge that she had listened to Lafa's words, Lafa caught the flicker of her eyelids as she glanced quickly toward Brousseau, and he knew that at the same instant she had seen the look on Brousseau's face. The Seigneur, mouthing impotently, had kept trying to rise; but now he sat open-mouthed in his chair, and thereafter they listened.

"I'll tell you why he wants the seigniory," continued Lafa. "I guess it's part plain greed, but there's another reason, and that explains why he wants to get Mr. Askew off. There's an asbestos mine on the island—Look at him! Look at him!"

Brousseau was glaring at him, the picture of impotent rage. Lafa, having indicated him with his hand, resumed:

"He kept it off the map in our office, pretending the island isn't on our limits, and he spread that story, but you know better, Mr. Rosny. The island has the best asbestos mine this side of Thetford, and I've seen the mines at Thetford. And it's worth a good quarter million dollars, I reckon. Maybe more. Maybe a million—I ain't no judge. And he's kept it secret from you."

"He's drunk or dreaming," muttered Brousseau, trembling. "A few strands of rock flax, commercially worthless—"

"But that ain't roguery. That's just a business trick," said Connell. "How did he get you into his power, Mr. Rosny, asking your pardon? I'll tell you. He's cheated you as he's cheated us, except that it was worse, because you trusted him, which we never did. That's what I come to tell you, Mr. Rosny. He's swindled you out of nearly forty thousand dollars on one deal, in North Empire Development company stock, and maybe in other—"

Brousseau leaped at Lafa like a tiger. Lafa, who had anticipated the move, stepped dexterously aside, at the same time twirling the chair on which his hand was resting. Brousseau, in his plunge forward, tripped over it, stumbled and fell prone to the floor.

"And I got the papers to prove that—here!" said Lafa triumphantly.

Brousseau rose, rubbing his shins and muttering curses, and glared savagely about him. Madeleine was breathing quickly, her eyes fixed intently on Lafa's face.

"It's a d—d lie!" cried Brousseau. "They've forged those papers. Where are they? Eh? Show me!"

"He said he was speaking for you, Mr. Rosny," said Lafa, "so here they are. I guess you know your signature?"

He drew the envelope from his pocket and placed the three documents on the Seigneur's knee, standing between him and Brousseau, who looked ready to leap again. But he did not leap; he muttered to Madeleine, who still watched Lafa breathlessly.

"I guess these letters don't tell you much, Mr. Rosny," continued Lafa. "If you'll put them together you'll see that those fifty thousand-dollar shares were sold for you in Quebec at a hundred dollars apiece."

"Yes, Monsieur Brousseau had ill fortune with that company. He explained it to me," said the Seigneur, trembling. "What of it?"

"Why, here's the market price of its shares five days before at \$75, that's all," said Lafa. "It didn't tumble that fast. All the country would have been ringing with it if it had done that. I guess Brousseau has that money of yours tucked away safely somewhere."

"You gave me your power of attorney—"

But his guilt was written on his face. The swiftness of the blow had utterly disconcerted him and made him incapable of defense. Lafa saw the Seigneur's expression change as if a mask had been torn from his features. He staggered to his feet, his left side helpless, and, grasping the chair with his right hand, confronted Brousseau.

"What have you to say? Is it true or false, monsieur?" he cried. "Where are my other stocks? You had a hundred thousand of my money. Where is it?"

"Find it!" yelled Brousseau. "Go to the devil with your money! I tried to help you out of friendship. I haven't time to work out your stock exchange accounts for you. If anybody's cheated you it's the stockbroker. Go to him for it!" He started toward Madeleine.

"You don't believe these lies against me?" he cried.

"You have insulted my father, but you have not answered him."

"It is true, then? It is true?"

"Yes, it's true," interposed Lafa. "It can't be anything else. Everybody knows what a rotten, swindling thief

the fellow is. Ah, keep your hand down, Mr. Rosny. I'm telling you what I think of him. That's what I came here for. And if you'll excuse me for referring to your mortgage, which everybody knows, if he doesn't turn that in to you by tomorrow Mr. Askew will sue him criminally as well as civilly for what he's done to us, because we've got the confession of the man that sawed the boom for him."

Brousseau swung on his heel suddenly and strode toward the door. He turned and shook his fist at Lafa. "I'll pay you for this, you and that other blackmailer!" he swore. "I'll smash your rotten concern. I'll—"

He broke off with a derisive snort and made toward the entrance. But Lafa strode past him and blocked his way.

"Just a moment," he said. "Mr. Rosny's got something to say to you."

Brousseau tried to fling himself past, but Lafa, standing like an iron sentinel, completely filled the opening.

"Monsieur Brousseau," said the Seigneur, "there are just a few words to say before you go. When Monsieur Connell came here he did not meet

with encouragement. He proved his case, and you have proved it by your actions. When you were a boy I advanced you, I interested myself in you. You climbed high, and you tried to repay me by ousting me from my lands and stepping into my shoes. You sought to dishonor us through my daughter, who was wiser than I in her recognition of what you were. I thought that you were only ill-bred, but you have proved yourself a scoundrel as well. You will repay me everything you have stolen or go to jail. Good-day, monsieur."

"That's all, I guess," said Lafa, and opened the door.

Brousseau dashed through and along the corridor. Lafa followed him at an interval; but Brousseau did not wait for him. He pulled the front door open and slammed it behind him.

When Lafa reached it Brousseau was already dragging his horse, already harnessed to his sleigh, out of the stables.

Lafa watched him drive away and turned back into the hall. He hesitated to return into the room, but as he stopped uncertainly in the corridor behind the entrance Madeleine came toward him.

"My father thanks you, Mr. Connell," she said, and though the tears rained down her face she smiled. "It is like the lifting of a nightmare," she whispered.

"Yes, mademoiselle," said Lafa. "But it was you I wanted chiefly to see."

"You saw me. What else is there to say? Mr. Connell, if you have come here on any other mission it is hopeless. Why did you let him send you for—that?" she continued, reading his face.

"Because he's my friend," said Lafa. "But he didn't send me here. He's talking of going away. That's why I came."

He saw her start, then control herself.

"I'm forty years old," said Lafa, conscious of the ineptness of the beginning, hesitated. "I'm forty years old," he continued. "Not old enough to be your father, mademoiselle, but old enough to be a sort of uncle, though I ain't got your education. That don't matter. It's experience that counts, and knowledge of the world. And I seen a good bit more of life than you, mademoiselle."

"I seen enough to learn one thing, and that is that misunderstandings are the cause of nearly all the trouble in the world. When Mr. Askew come here I wasn't altogether too much pleased. I'd been meshed into the crooked work that Morris and Monsieur Brousseau was doing with the seigniory lumber. Then when I got to know Hilary Askew I saw that he was clean straight through."

He let his hand fall lightly on the girl's shoulder. The gesture, which might have been an offense in some, was instinctive, and, like most instinctive actions, fitting. Lafa, un-

derstandings are the cause of nearly all the trouble in the world. When Mr. Askew come here I wasn't altogether too much pleased. I'd been meshed into the crooked work that Morris and Monsieur Brousseau was doing with the seigniory lumber. Then when I got to know Hilary Askew I saw that he was clean straight through."

He let his hand fall lightly on the girl's shoulder. The gesture, which might have been an offense in some, was instinctive, and, like most instinctive actions, fitting. Lafa, un-

derstandings are the cause of nearly all the trouble in the world. When Mr. Askew come here I wasn't altogether too much pleased. I'd been meshed into the crooked work that Morris and Monsieur Brousseau was doing with the seigniory lumber. Then when I got to know Hilary Askew I saw that he was clean straight through."

He let his hand fall lightly on the girl's shoulder. The gesture, which might have been an offense in some, was instinctive, and, like most instinctive actions, fitting. Lafa, un-

derstandings are the cause of nearly all the trouble in the world. When Mr. Askew come here I wasn't altogether too much pleased. I'd been meshed into the crooked work that Morris and Monsieur Brousseau was doing with the seigniory lumber. Then when I got to know Hilary Askew I saw that he was clean straight through."

He let his hand fall lightly on the girl's shoulder. The gesture, which might have been an offense in some, was instinctive, and, like most instinctive actions, fitting. Lafa, un-

derstandings are the cause of nearly all the trouble in the world. When Mr. Askew come here I wasn't altogether too much pleased. I'd been meshed into the crooked work that Morris and Monsieur Brousseau was doing with the seigniory lumber. Then when I got to know Hilary Askew I saw that he was clean straight through."

He let his hand fall lightly on the girl's shoulder. The gesture, which might have been an offense in some, was instinctive, and, like most instinctive actions, fitting. Lafa, un-

derstandings are the cause of nearly all the trouble in the world. When Mr. Askew come here I wasn't altogether too much pleased. I'd been meshed into the crooked work that Morris and Monsieur Brousseau was doing with the seigniory lumber. Then when I got to know Hilary Askew I saw that he was clean straight through."

He let his hand fall lightly on the girl's shoulder. The gesture, which might have been an offense in some, was instinctive, and, like most instinctive actions, fitting. Lafa, un-

derstandings are the cause of nearly all the trouble in the world. When Mr. Askew come here I wasn't altogether too much pleased. I'd been meshed into the crooked work that Morris and Monsieur Brousseau was doing with the seigniory lumber. Then when I got to know Hilary Askew I saw that he was clean straight through."

He let his hand fall lightly on the girl's shoulder. The gesture, which might have been an offense in some, was instinctive, and, like most instinctive actions, fitting. Lafa, un-

derstandings are the cause of nearly all the trouble in the world. When Mr. Askew come here I wasn't altogether too much pleased. I'd been meshed into the crooked work that Morris and Monsieur Brousseau was doing with the seigniory lumber. Then when I got to know Hilary Askew I saw that he was clean straight through."

He let his hand fall lightly on the girl's shoulder. The gesture, which might have been an offense in some, was instinctive, and, like most instinctive actions, fitting. Lafa, un-

derstandings are the cause of nearly all the trouble in the world. When Mr. Askew come here I wasn't altogether too much pleased. I'd been meshed into the crooked work that Morris and Monsieur Brousseau was doing with the seigniory lumber. Then when I got to know Hilary Askew I saw that he was clean straight through."

couth, unlettered, standing before Madeleine Rosny, seemed like a benevolent guardian.

"When he came to like you I was glad," continued Lafa. "But when you came to like him I was just about as happy as when I was leading Clarice—my wife, I mean—out of the First Methodist church at Shoeburypore, Mass., on August 17, 1902, with her white veil hiding her, and them orange flowers she was carrying scenting up the place . . . not quite so glad, maybe, but not far shy of it. And you think he wasn't true to you? What man in his senses wouldn't be?"

"I won't hear you!" cried the girl, summoning her defiance to her aid. "He should have spoken for himself. What right have you to speak for him, sent or unsent?"

"Why, I thought I'd explain that, mamzelle. Just because I'm his friend," said Lafa. "It ain't true. Not a word of that story's true. I'm going to tell you the truth. But first I'm going to say what I got to say, because it's true. You haven't acted rightly toward him—no, you haven't, mamzelle!"

The passionate gesture, the sincerity of his tone dominated her. She tried to find her voice and could not; she tried to find indignation and could not.

"We went to Ste. Marie together to see conditions there, to see what sort of place Simeon Duval was running. The girl was there. It was the night of the raid, and we helped her away. She got home, and her father never knew. Little Baptiste knew, and others who'd seen her with us. They told Brousseau, and he started those lies about Mr. Askew, who never knew about it—never knew anything."

"That fellow Pierre Brousseau's man, had his eye on the girl. You know the sort of work he's done along this coast. Maybe you don't, but it's devil's work, mamzelle, and he and Leblanc lured Marie into a boat by means of their decoy, Nanette Bonnat, and took her to the island. We found them there, and saved her, and brought the girls back. That's all. Now you know. Now you understand how you've done Hilary a wrong. If you don't believe me," Lafa continued doggedly, "just tell me how much you don't believe, and I'll prove it. I'll prove every word; you don't have to take me on trust."

"Do you think I am capable of seeking evidence that a man is true to me?" cried Madeleine. "Do you think I am going into St. Boniface to pry into your friend's actions?"

"You love him, mamzelle," said Lafa, with patience that would not be thwarted. "I can read that in your face. You love him, and you've done him a wrong. Well, mamzelle, you can't lie down under that. You can't bear it. You've got to right it."

She burst into helpless tears. "I hoped that he would come to me," she whispered.